



## ***European Defence-Lite: Why European Defence is Less about Defence and More about Politics***

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**Theme:** European defence should be understood, also, as a pawn in the game between the major EU partners to secure a leading place in the Union's power hierarchy.

**Summary:** One of the primary reasons for the split between Europeans over the war in Iraq was the major European players' need to maximise their influence in the new Europe. The debate brought to the fore the fact that Spain has emerged as a coherent force that could prevent a *tri-rectoire* of the big three from determining the EU's strategic direction. Furthermore, EU enlargement should ensure that closeness to the US remains a prerequisite of effective security and defence.

### **Analysis: *Much Ado About Not a Lot***

Newspaper headlines are full of European defence these days. Political controversy rages over a new headquarters for the EU that might compete with NATO. Talk abounds about capabilities goals to enable the EU to act in Europe and beyond. The place that defence should take in the forthcoming EU constitution excites politicians from Madrid to Warsaw, from Berlin to London and from Rome to Paris. In such a fevered environment the European citizen could be forgiven for believing that Europe stands on the verge of strategic independence from the United States, willing and able to bear the costs of its own security and defence and equipped to take on the many onerous challenges that await it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most European armed forces today reflect decisions taken at the end of the Cold War when threat had been banished forever and defence budgets could be plundered for society's other pressing needs. So, what is all the fuss about?

The answer can be found in the important political moment that Europe confronts. The two great political projects of deepening Europe and widening Europe have merged into what the Americans would call a 'tipping point'. It is a moment that historians will look back upon as a decisive juncture in the development of the European Union –ever closer or ever looser. At such a time the politics of hierarchy, ie, who leads and who follows becomes of paramount importance, far greater than the politics of community. This is nowhere better understood than in Europe's power capitals, Berlin, London, Paris and, indeed, Madrid. Prime Minister Aznar has understood the game that is underway between Europe's major powers and successfully positioned Spain as a key partners of Tony Blair's Britain to counterbalance the ambitions of France in particular and Germany more generally to lead and shape the new enlarged Europe.

European defence is the pawn in this game of strategic chess because it is the one area that reflects most candidly old-fashioned balances of power within the European Union. It is also the area that can most openly suggest who leads and who follows. Thus, European defence is less and less about defence and more and more about politics. It is much ado about not a lot.

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### *What Iraq Really Meant for Europe*

In that light the deeply disturbing split between Europeans over Iraq can be seen in a new light. All the major European actors involved acted partly out of a genuine belief in the moral rectitude of their respective positions. They also acted primarily out of a need to maximise their influence and minimise that of others in the new Europe. Thus, Iraq for Europeans was not really about Iraq but about Europe. The debate also enabled certain power truisms to come to the fore that had been hidden by the nature of the European debate. First, it became clear that Germany was no longer the junior but rather the senior partner in the German-Franco axis. Second, that Britain, with an economy now some 10% bigger than the French economy and as Europe's leading military power by some considerable distance, cannot be excluded from any of the strategic thinking of France and Germany. Third, the emergence of Spain as a coherent and powerful force undermines the likelihood that a working and cohesive *tri-rectoire* of the big three could exclude states such as Spain from the setting of EU strategic direction. This was reinforced during the Spanish Presidency of the EU by Madrid's energetic calls for a European Armaments Policy. Fourth, the enlargement of the EU inevitably means a tipping of the balance of power in favour of those European countries who believe that closeness to the US is a pre-requisite of effective security and defence. This has particular implications for the balance between the EU's European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and NATO.

The French opposed the US and the UK in what was a matter of principle for Paris but also an inherently defensive move designed primarily to damage the positions of Britain and Spain within the Union at this crucial moment. It was also important for France to tie an increasingly assertive Germany into some form of framework for the future leadership of the enlarged Union. The Germans opposed the US and the UK because the war was deeply unpopular in Germany and defying the US was the only way Chancellor Schroeder could win an election. France and Germany thus found common cause in opposing the war that both President Chirac and Chancellor Schroeder saw as a gilt-edged opportunity to also re-engage the German-French motor that had traditionally led European developments. The forthcoming enlargement of the Union has placed particular emphasis in Paris and Berlin on the need to re-create a core Europe that they lead, before a broad Europe that they cannot lead makes managing their joint political agenda that much more complicated. However, whilst France's commitment to that relationship is clearly structural, Germany seems less wedded to a counter-balancing role for Europe that defines the Union in opposition to the US, whatever the recent rhetoric about possible union between the two countries.

The UK was forced into supporting the US on a question of fundamental policy to the Bush Administration or risk placing the special relationship with Washington in jeopardy. It has been British policy since the Suez Crisis of 1956 never to directly oppose the US on a matter of significant importance to an American Administration and so it proved in 2003. However, as soon as France had indicated a desire to use the Iraq Crisis as a test of strength and 'loyalty' over the enlarged Europe Britain joined battle. Tony Blair, with the support of Prime Minister Aznar successfully demonstrated that leadership of the EU was no longer the almost exclusive preserve of Paris and Berlin and that the UK, Spain and Italy could very quickly build counter-coalitions if France, in particular, dared presume the right to 'speak' for Europe.

Spain successfully demonstrated during the Iraq Crisis that it was no longer a follower but a co-leader in European affairs and a close friend of the world's only superpower. Although this was done at some domestic cost to Prime Minister Aznar, his decision to leave power in 2004 made this less of an issue than it might otherwise have been. Iraq enabled Spain to return to the top table of power at a key moment in both European and transatlantic politics and thus make it more difficult not just for France and Germany to 'lead' Europe but also for Britain, France and Germany to exclude Spain from a *tri-rectoire* should they reach an accommodation at some time in the future.

### *The Tervuren Fiasco*

On 29 April, 2003, in a move that could not have been more spectacularly mistimed, Belgium was prevailed upon by France and Germany (in conjunction with tiny Luxembourg) to propose an independent EU military headquarters capable of planning and commanding military operations. Again, the politics of the proposal was far more important than the proposal itself. A wholly independent operational planning and command headquarters would require a whole infrastructure ranging from a deployable component to secure communications with national capitals that no European state could begin to afford. Whilst the aspiration for greater operational autonomy for the Union is not an unreasonable idea, the proposal emphasised the degree of competition that had emerged in Anglo-French relations in 2003.

The November 2002 NATO Prague Summit was meant to have signalled a definitive agreement between the NATO and EU member-states over access to NATO assets and capabilities during crises. The so-called Berlin-plus process included the use of NATO planning and command infrastructure at the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) for the planning of EU-led operations. Whilst it was envisaged that the EU might on occasions undertake operations without recourse to NATO and using national assets and capabilities, that was for only the most limited of operations. As if to prove the point the French went one step further in July 2003 by leading a stabilisation mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) under an EU flag. In effect, the Tervuren proposal threatened to tear Berlin-plus apart because an EU headquarters would progressively find itself in competition with NATO, diverting precious planning and command resources and experience away from the Alliance. Not surprisingly, the UK and US reacted with some vigour to this initiative and refused to countenance such a development. Spain also indicated that it had no wish to associate itself at this stage with any proposal that might undermine NATO, in particular the important role it was taking in the development of the NATO Response Force.

Tervuren demonstrated something of the political psychology within the Alliance at the time. Belgium, France and Germany had bitterly opposed the decision to send Alliance military aid to Turkey to prevent any possible attack against the Turks in the event of hostilities. In the end, a procedural manoeuvre had been used by Lord Robertson, the NATO Secretary-General, by which the decision to aid Turkey was taken in the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) of which France was not a member, instead of the North Atlantic Council in which France was. Belgium and Germany were then prevailed upon to accept the decision.

Tervuren also demonstrated the gap between the political rhetoric of European defence and the reality: it highlighted not only what would be needed to fashion an effective European defence, but the state of Europe's armed forces in relation to the environment in which Europe finds itself and what it should be doing to secure its many vital interests world-wide. In effect, with the exception of the British and French, Europeans are trying to use post-Cold War armed forces to undertake complex twenty-first century security operations far beyond the range and intensity for which most European armed forces are designed.

Deployability and usability of European armed forces are frankly appalling and, in spite of recent reforms and its leading role in the NATO Response Force, Spain cannot exempt itself from such criticisms. Lord Robertson recently said that of 1.5 million people in uniform Europe can only find around 150,000 troops for operations. In other words, most European states can deploy little more than 10% of their armed forces at any one time. Due to the need to rotate deployed forces, requiring a 2-1 ratio between those preparing and the forces standing down, this means that on average only 3% of European forces can be deployed at any one time.

These are pitiful figures and, given the lack of real reform and defence investment in Europe, they are unlikely to change soon. This is partly the result of conscription and the nature of the missions of the new security agenda. It reflects a lack of political will to properly invest in defence but above all a lack of any real interest in a really autonomous European defence. Belgium is one of the worst offenders in this regard, with armed forces which are in a very poor state indeed. Thus, the fact that it was Belgium that proposed the Tervuren headquarters tends to emphasise the gap between political rhetoric and hard military reality.

Moreover, much of Europe's capability remains on paper only. The EU's 1999 Headline Goal called for a European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) to be ready for deployment by the end of 2003. The ERRF was to be designed to put 60,000 troops into the field over a period of 60 days and to be sustained for up to a year, undertaking missions that covered the full range of Petersberg Tasks of rescue and humanitarian missions, peacekeeping and the role of combat troops in peacemaking, ie, the kind of mission that American, British and other troops are currently carrying out in Iraq. The force was to be supported by 400 aircraft and 100 ships. True to style, the Laeken European Council of the Belgian Presidency in December 2001 declared the ERRF to be fully operational. This was not only fantasy but *dangerous* fantasy. In the past Europeans have set targets that they have then simply failed to fulfil but now it would seem too many European leaders are prepared to pretend that they have achieved targets that have not been met. To all intents and purposes the Headline Goal has failed and yet certain leaders continue to pretend that this virtual force is a real force. The danger undoubtedly exists that as a result ill-equipped, ill-trained Europeans will be sent to undertake dangerous tasks just to maintain the illusion of progress in European defence.

If Europe was serious about such a capability that emphasised autonomy from the US and NATO there would be a range of equipment programmes and other reforms that would be underway. First and foremost, Europe would be developing a network-enabling concept designed to tie European forces together into an operational command and control hierarchy that included effective intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance. Such a system would be different to American Network Centric Warfare concepts because it would be required to operate at a markedly lower level of military-technical capability, tie forces at very different levels together and operate at levels of intensity from warfighting down to peacekeeping. Although France, Germany and Italy are looking at some strategic intelligence assets and the UK, and to a lesser extent France, are examining such a concept for Europe to improve the efficiency of coalitions in the field there is little really going on at a declared European level.

Furthermore, whilst there are some interesting programmes underway in the area of lift, logistics and precision-guided munitions (PGMs), Europe's relatively poor performance in fulfilling NATO's Prague Capabilities Commitments (PCC) and the EU's European Capabilities Action Plan (ECAP) emphasises the lack of political commitment.

#### **Conclusions: *European Defence-Lite***

Thus, European defence is less about defence and more about politics. This is a shame because whilst NATO must and should remain the focal point for Europe's high-intensity military capability so that Europeans and Americans can work together, it is in the interest of all the transatlantic partners that the EU becomes ever more effective. The EU brings a unique holistic approach to security governance that is essential if effectiveness, balance and legitimacy are to be realised. Unfortunately, too many Europeans continue to undermine EU security effectiveness because they use the EU's alternative approach as a mask for doing too little, too late. It is not the Americans or NATO that are undermining EU strategic autonomy but those Europeans that prefer strategic pretence to strategic responsibilities. In such an environment it is almost inevitable that the *tri-rectoire* of Britain,

France and Germany will take the lead, effectively re-nationalising their security policies in the process.

Spain is pivotal to ensuring that whilst the big powers offer effective leadership they do so within the political framework of the EU and NATO, with Madrid acting as an essential interface between the bigger and smaller powers in Europe. Given Spain's historic world role and view it is a job only Madrid can perform. In other words, Spain needs to learn how to lead by example and to remind the big three that they are partners, not competitors. 2003 emphasised Spanish leadership and at the rhetorical level it was a test Madrid passed, but if Spain is to continue to punch above its weight, exercise sound influence and cement ties between Americans and Europeans and NATO and the EU, Spain must now go beyond the rhetorical and re-invest in its defence as part of Europe's security. Only then will the gravitas and credibility that European Defence so desperately needs become reality. This is your moment Spain. Europe needs you.

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